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TAGS: KIRF PHUM PGOV PREL VM
SUBJECT: ANGRY MOB DISRUPTS EU VISIT WITH LANG MAI FOLLOWERS; CRA DENIES SPONSORSHIP REQUESTS

REF: HCMC 669 AND PREVIOUS

HO CHI MIN 00000672 001.2 OF 002

Subject: Angry Mob Disrupts EU Visit with Lang Mai Followers;
CRA Denies Sponsorship Requests

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The situation for the Lang Mai followers currently housed at the Phuoc Hue pagoda deteriorated further on December 9 after angry locals gathered and threatened the group, calling on Phuoc Hue's leaders to evict them -- the same tactics that were used to force them to leave Bat Nha pagoda in September (reflets). Local authorities were present but have done nothing to dissuade the mob, according to a Lang Mai nun. The crowd of protesters also interrupted a visit by three resident EU diplomats (who, according to press reports, returned for meetings later in the day), and followers report rising tensions. More seriously, the national Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) meanwhile denied requests from two Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) pagodas that offered to sponsor the group in Dong Nai and Dalat, and ordered the followers to disperse and return to their home provinces. Post continues to call for a peaceful and legal resolution to the situation. We are meeting with senior CRA officials on December 14 to express our concerns, and ConGenOff will visit Lam Dong December 15-17. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On December 9, foreign press reported that a three-member EU delegation broke off their morning meeting with Lang Mai followers after approximately 100 angry locals gathered, shouting threats and calling on Phuoc Hue's leader, Thich Thai Thuan, to evict the group. The EU delegation later returned to Phuoc Hue pagoda in the afternoon to meet privately with Thich Thai Thuan, but a Lang Mai nun told ConGenOff that protesters smelling of alcohol returned after the delegation left, and are still protesting at the pagoda. An online video clip (<http://hoitrongbatnha.blogspot.com/>) shows several monks being pushed and shoved by locals inside the pagoda's main atrium, then switches to a scene inside the pagoda where townspeople confront a small group of adherents. Near the end of the clip, the crowd is heard shouting as the monks try to conduct services. In the video clip, the Lang Mai adherents are shown passively enduring the shouting and shoving. Our contact reported that several plainclothes police were interspersed with the crowd and local police have failed to respond to the pagoda's requests for assistance. She called the situation increasingly "dangerous," and asserted that authorities are using the same tactics employed to force the group out of Bat Nha pagoda in September.

¶13. (SBU) Meanwhile, on November 26, the national CRA officially turned down two sponsorship offers by VBS pagodas in Dalat and Dong Nai, saying the group did not have permission from local authorities to gather at religious institutions and instructing Lang Mai adherents to return to the provinces where they have legal residency by December 2009. A local media report on the CRA's decision said the Lang Mai adherents have "breached the VBS charter and failed to obey the law, threatening the unity of Vietnam's Buddhist community and the prestige of the national and Lam Dong VBS."

¶14. (SBU) Approximately 200 monks and nuns who range in age from 15 to 25 years old are currently residing at Phuoc Hue pagoda. Among the expelled leaders of Lang Mai, monk Phap Sy remains under house arrest in Khanh Hoa province, but has been in touch with ConGen regarding the recent developments in Lam Dong. Monk Phap Hoi is in Hanoi, while Monk Phap Tu reportedly remains in hiding at an undisclosed location.

¶15. (SBU) Comment: The events that preceded the Lang Mai group's forced eviction from Bat Nha pagoda in September appear to be repeating themselves at Phuoc Hue, and the tense situation reported by EU and Lang Mai representatives does not bode well for a non-violent end to the group's bid to remain together. The CRA's decision to turn down the two VBS requests for sponsorship leaves the adherents with no legal recourse, and Post believes the monks and nuns will eventually be forced to disperse and return to their home provinces. Post continues to call for a peaceful resolution and protection for the Lang Mai group, a point we will raise with when we meet the national-level CRA December 14. We remain in contact with our

HO CHI MIN 00000672 002.2 OF 002

EU colleagues and will press forward with plans to return to Lam Dong ourselves December 15-17. End comment.

¶16. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.
FAIRFAX